THE GREEN PLANET

NDREK GJINI

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The Green Planet

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Forwarded by Michael Mullen[1]

I cannot recall the exact date and day upon which I met Ndrek Gjini. He was a charming man, quiet of voice and possessed an intelligent eye. He was a political exile from his country, a most respected journalist and writer and well established in his own country. It was his journalistic honesty which caused both himself and his family to flee from Albania and seek refuge in the West. First, they came to Dublin and then to Castlebar. The events of the first two years in exile are Kafkaesque, sad and taste of bitter salt. Both he and his family were thrown into a new culture. They lived in a single room in Castlebar, their language skills were limited and there were two children to rear. Ndrek Gjini was locked out of a literary culture and poured patiently over dictionaries trying to come to terms with a new language. Then one day like the young gull on a high Aran rock face he threw himself into the air and learned to fly. He emerged from his limiting space and began to talk. Quietly both he and his family found their voices and their friends. Thanks to a kind neighbour, they moved into a good house, sent their children to school and began the process of integration. Ndrek had found his voice. He began to write in English. First, he wrote poetry which I regard as firm, sad, heart-warming and unusual. It has a definite tone and deep

[1] ***Michael Mullen is an Irish novelist, with international reputation with over 30 novels published in Ireland and abroad.***

maturity. It looks at the world in an unusual way. Formerly I think ink flowed through his veins, then it was frozen by tyranny, and now it is flowing freely again.

Like many literary exiles he has begun to keep a diary. It has been published in the Connaught Telegraph week by week and how honest and moving it is. As a stranger to the town, he looks upon us with a novel eye. He observes things which we take for granted. He looks upon everything freshly as if the world has been newly made for him. It was slowly and with difficulty that he has reached that position but one must remember that there have been fine writers in English who were born abroad. Tom Stoppard was born in Czechoslovakia and Conrad was Polish. Samuel Beckett wrote in French.

Ndrek Gjini's diary is wonderful to read. Every page is human. Every page tells you something about the man and his family and the small domestic adventures which are part and parcel of living and always have been so. His writing is never sycophantic. He states his truth plainly. He set things down as he sees them in an easy fashion.

Such voices are wonderful to listen to. I am sure that these writings will be enjoyed by a wide range of people.

Castlebar and its generous people are feeding my dreams

1st January 2005

A new year but same old weather. The winds blow and the rain falls. The gales never seem to stop whistling in the chimney but I console myself that spring with its gift of brighter days will soon be here. In winter the west of Ireland can be, what do you say, hard going for someone who has lived most of their life in a Mediterranean climate. I hear the wind especially late at night when the house is quiet, the children are asleep and I am working on my computer. I use the computer a lot. It is my hobby, my passion, as I am at home mostly. Socialisation in Mayo is difficult for foreigners even if my English has improved in the three years since we have been here.

15th January 2005

I am feeling better about myself and my new environment. Castlebar is constantly growing. New houses are being built all the time. What is practically a new town centre has been built. It is work in progress.

Sometimes I feel I am living in a city. That may not necessarily be a good thing in the long run though. I don't like cities much. We picked Castlebar as a place to live when we came to Ireland. I felt it would be better for the children if we lived outside Dublin. I am glad we made this choice.

22nd January 2005

We live in a housing estate on the north side of Castlebar. The countryside is only a few minutes away. Today is Saturday and this morning I took my son Klajd for a walk. We walked to the top of the mountain – the mountain with the TV transmitter station on it. Klajd is still in primary school but he is getting stronger all the time. The walk was no bother to him. I make a note that we both should try to climb Croagh Patrick soon. It is good to get out of the house after a long winter.

24th January 2005

When I came here three years ago, I did not know how to say, "Yes" or "No" in English. What's more I did not have or own anything. All my 'property' was one small bag of clothes and another bag with books and

dictionaries. I was a former journalist and writer from Albania, forced to leave my country, trying to escape with my life. Now, I could say that this town is my second native home because my life has been reborn. Most of the people here are very kind and friendly. I am happier than at the start. Here I am studying and writing. I manage to squeeze in the odd pint of Guinness or glass of wine at my friend Pablo's restaurant. I like it there - their pizzas are the best. Just as importantly, it is easier to talk to my friends there. Irish pubs can be noisy when very busy - a bit uncomfortable.

26th January 2005

One of my few frustrations about living in Ireland is that I have been unable, so far, to publish any book here; I have published many books in my own country. They are in the Albanian language so no one can read them here. But for the last year I have been trying to translate my poems into English with a view to getting them published. Do you know why? I really would love to share my feelings with the people here, especially my friends who are very nice to my family and me. It is not easy; perhaps my poems will lose much of their meaning once translated, but still, some of the feelings in them would remain. Castlebar and its generous people are

feeding my dreams. I have written a book of poems, *The Clouds' Hands,* which I would love to have published. I dedicated it to two families, Jim Brett, his wife Ann and his daughter Ann Marie, also to Christy Tynan, his wife Mary and his daughter Fionnuala. They opened up their homes and their hearts to us when we were having a very difficult time.

31st January 2005

For the past year, I have been doing a journalism course at Castlebar College of Further Education. This morning I am excited. I have begun a two-week work experience stint with the *Connaught Telegraph* newspaper. I have missed working with journalists. I wanted to share my feelings with journalists in Castlebar, to talk to them about my life and my career, about my country and my books and my poems - about everything that has happened to me. But I was not able to do that.

So, I went back to my house in Foxfield, near Garryduff Park and I was very sad. All I could be was sad. I didn't know how to speak English so how was I to share my feelings with my colleagues?

After that I made a decision to learn English. Intensively. A number of kind friends gave me presents of dictionaries. One of those friends, Christy, told me if I really wanted to improve my English, I needed to get my head out of the books and get out and meet people. It is one of the best pieces of advice I ever got.

The Connaught Telegraph 16 February 2005

Mother Teresa, Ireland and Albania

8th February 2005

Mother Teresa, the most famous Albanian woman, was just 18 years old when she came to Ireland. She joined the Sisters of Loreto, a community of Irish nuns in 1928. Then she lived in Dublin for a short period before travelling to Calcutta where she started work as a teacher. After training as a nurse in 1948 she founded a new order, the Missionaries of Charity, to serve the blind, the diseased and dying among the city's poor.

In 1964 she founded Shanti Nagar, a leper colony that was built near Asansol, West Bengal. From that year her order ran schools, clinics, children's homes and hospices in cities throughout India and in other developing countries.

She was a tiny woman with evident political skills as well as a constant sense of purpose and now is revered throughout the world. Her many honours include the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. Her real name was Age (Gonxhe) Bojaxhiu. ‘Gonxhe’ in the Albanian language means ‘bud’, while ‘Bojaxhi’ means ‘painter’.

Mother Teresa started her career in Ireland so this country should be proud of her.

The Connaught Telegraph 16 February 2005

Patients on trolleys in Mayo General Hospital…not good for a wealthy nation

14th February 2005

Tonight, as usual I went to the Linenhall Centre for a meeting with Castlebar Writers' Group. It is great for me because every member gets to read his or her work to other members, be it poems or short stories. Since I started coming here, I feel much better than before. I feel much more confident and better able to express myself in English, my adopted language. Four members of the Ballina Writers' Group were guests at tonight's meeting. They read a number of poems they had written about the Tsunami disaster. In these poems I detected generosity of spirit and deep fillings.

One of things I heard tonight which surprised me was the fact that in the past few months Irish people have given more to the Tsunami Disaster Fund than the entire US Government. This information serves to highlight for me what a wonderful place Ireland is, a place where the people are really generous and sensitive.

At the end of the meeting, I asked one of the Ballina poets, Marty Walsh, for permission to publish

part of his poem ‘Blink of an eye’ about the Tsunami tragedy:

In the blink of an eye in the sparkling sand
We sat on the beach I held your hand.
And as we kissed all my dreams came true
You went for a swim then I lost you.
From under the sea came the kiss of death
In the blink of an eye the scene was set
In the blink of an eye I heard the quake.
My heart stood still the earth did shake
Across the continents the seas did roar,
In the blink of an eye from friend to foe.
In the blink of an eye devils of the sea
Up from the deep came after me.
In the blink of an eye with lightning speed
That wave of sea it covered me
In the blink of an eye panic all around
As building and trees fell to the ground
Like a scene from hell death came at will
In the blink of an eye so many killed.
In the blink of an eye distraction and pain
Sadness and madness people insane
On the wet sand a mother and child
Wrapped in each other they close their eyes
In the blink of an eye its vengeance spread
I looked around thousands dead

In the blink of an eye rich and poor
Just disappeared heard of no more
I then reached out to a dying friend
His last words to me, Is this the end?
In the blink of an eye you never can tell
At any given moment its either heaven or hell.

15th February 2005

My son Klajd is sick with a severe tummy bug. I spend the first of two nights in Mayo General Hospital with him. The doctors and nurses are very kind and helpful. Compared to my own country, Albania, I have to say the health services here are better. New buildings, new technology, everything clean and a high standard of service. However, everything is not perfect. Many patients are on trolleys in the corridors. This is not good for a country like Ireland, a country which, according to the new book *Top Ten of Everything 2005,* ranks high in the table of wealthy nations. A shortage of hospital beds suggests to me that the Irish Government needs to put more money into the health system for extending hospitals.

On a more positive note, I would like to mention some brilliant examples of Irish hospitality experienced as a result of our hospital experience. My son's friend Conor came to the hospital where he spent the whole day playing with my son. We were just two days in hospital yet, despite the short stay, we received many cards, magazines, books and flowers from our friends in Castlebar. This is the kind of thing that makes my family and me happy.

Last night our neighbour Christine with her children Daragh and Sinead came to the hospital and spent more than two hours with us. This afternoon our next-door neighbour, Loyola, came to our house with a pot of stew. She cooked especially for us because she thought we were going to the hospital and that we hadn't time to cook. These wonderful things could also have been done by people in our own native home, by people just as generous as the Irish. So, when people are treating you like this here in Ireland, you feel like you are living in your native home.

16th February 2005

Dropped in to my friend Pablo's restaurant for a quick coffee. I always feel very proud of my native country, Albania, when I see Mother Teresa's photo hanging on the wall. Pablo tells me the picture of Mother Teresa was a gift from a diner who is now his girlfriend. It seems this woman was having a meal in Pablo's and got into conversation with him about Mother Teresa and their mutual admiration for her. A few days later this lady arrived at his restaurant with the framed photo together with the enclosed message: 'This picture of Mother Teresa, the most famous Albanian women, is just a small gift for your great kindness.'

I met Mother Teresa twice when I was working as a journalist in Albania. Her goodness touched everyone. Even now here in Ireland when people get to know where I am from, they mention this great woman.

When I say I met her once people want to touch the hem of my jacket - it's as if I am saint-like.

The Connaught Telegraph 23 February 2005

My friend, Fr. Michael likes to disco

24th February 2005

One of the people I have befriended since I came here with my family three years ago is Fr. Michael Murphy, the priest and chaplain in GMIT, Castlebar. Fr. Michael gets on well with students. They find it easy to talk to him. He is easy-going, friendly and seems to have a perpetual smile on his face.

One day an acquaintance told me Fr. Michael was a regular visitor to the Mantra Disco which is held on Thursday nights in the Welcome Inn Hotel. "If he wants to drink and dance with young women then maybe the priesthood is not for him and he should leave", this person said, not in an unkind or indignant way but obviously shocked at the idea that this priest was frequenting the disco. It was only later, the penny dropped. Fr. Michael was not a regular visitor to the disco to chat up young ladies. The weekly disco was his missionary field. Here he got to talk to the GMIT students on equal terms as a fellow young person and a human being. I see now that socializing with students at their regular discos was Fr. Michael's way of getting through

to the young people who are lucky to have him as their chaplain.

Anyway, there should be no big deal if priests like Fr. Michael wanted to get married. Something should be done to change all those rules in the Catholic Church, many of which seem old fashioned nowadays. Priests are human beings so why are they forbidden to marry and have children like everyone else? The rules should be changed to allow not only married priests but also women priests.

25th February 2005

I have borrowed a book about Irish folklore from the library. Reading this book, I discover that fairies, snakes and dragons are among the principal figures in Irish mythology. This is not dissimilar to Albanian mythology where we have 'kuceder' (a snake or dragon with many heads), 'shtrige' (witch) and 'stuhi' (a flame-throwing winged being that guards treasures). To call someone a 'kukudh' (goblin) is the ultimate insult, its full meaning being 'a dwarf with seven tails who can't find rest in his grave.' The Zana, meaning 'fairy of the mountain', is a legendary Albanian mythological creature who helps mountain folk in distress, while the 'ore' (fairy)

also appears frequently in Albanian folklore although sometimes as an expression of fate: ‘i vdiq ora’ (his luck ran out).

26th February 2005

A friend of mine living in London sent me an e-mail. ‘You are lucky to live in Ireland,’ he wrote, ‘because Irish people are responsive and sociable and you can have great fun with them. Here in London most people are cold. They really don't like foreigners.’ After receiving his e-mail, I went home and decided to write something about interpersonal relations in Albania as it struck me that they are not dissimilar to interpersonal relations in Ireland.

To this day, there is an elaborate protocol of greetings and exchanges when entering the home of an Albanian family. For example, after first being served the

‘qerasje’ (treat) consisting of ‘liko’ (a jam-like sweet) along with a drink or coffee by the hostess or other female member of the family the visitor would enquire about the health of each member of the hostess' family in a careful and deliberate manner. Then the hostess would, in turn, enquire about the health of each member

of the visitor's family. Only after this procedure is complete can people relax and begin normal conversation. The Albanians are very expressive people, using their eyes (rolling upwards), hands (approval/disapproval), and bodies (shoulder shrugging, etc) to reinforce their statements. They are great mimics and have a good sense of humour. Sacrosanct to all Albanians from olden days to more recent times is the concept of the 'besa' or pledged word. More respected than a written contract was the verbal 'besa-besen' agreement, sealed by a handshake or embrace and woe to the person who violated it! The greatest insult in Albania is to call a man 'i-pabese', that is to say someone who has broken his word or who is disloyal or without honour.

27th February 2005

Today is Sunday. I go to Mc Goldrick's bar in Castlebar with friends to watch the rugby match between England and Ireland. Such passion and excitement! It reminded me of international soccer games back home in Tirane when Albania was playing. Rugby is not popular in Albania but it seems to have a big future in Italy, just across the Adriatic from us. Today's rugby match was a big family occasion. Everybody

seemed happy that England was beaten. The Irish don't seem to like the English much. I wonder why.

The Connaught Telegraph 2 March 2005

Bombs, bullets, bank heists. Only the bad things about Ireland make news worldwide

28th February 2005

This morning I call to the Internet Cafe on Linenhall Street and log on to Albania's daily newspapers. There is no news about Ireland, has not been for weeks. The last mention of Ireland in the Albanian press came in the wake of the big bank robbery in Belfast before Christmas, which was blamed on the IRA. Only the bad news about Ireland makes the papers in Albania. As a result, most Albanians have a perception of this country as a terrorists' haven. They are more used to seeing Gerry Adams' bearded face on the television than that of the Taoiseach, Mr. Ahern, or the President, Mary McAleese. Thus Albanians, and indeed the inhabitants of all Balkan countries, have a distorted image of Ireland. They do not know, for instance, that Ireland has the lowest crime rate in the EU. They are ignorant of the fact that the Irish are a friendly, peaceful race and that they are extremely tolerant of foreigners. They do not know that Ireland just 30 years ago was the poorest country in EU and now is the third richest in the world. They do not know that this small country has won more Nobel Prizes for literature than Spain and Italy put together. They do not know that,

on a worldwide scale, Ireland ranks in fifth place for having the highest proportion of adults in higher education and in sixth place for exporting high-tech industry. I think something should be done to promote a truer image of Ireland across the world. In Italy, Greece and the rest of the Balkans, there are almost 1,000 Irish pubs, yet there is not one centre or institute where the history and identity of Ireland can be explained or explored. There's more to Ireland than pubs, you know. What a shame and a pity the message about the real `emerald isle' isn't getting through to the worldwide audience.

1st March 2005

My spirits are lifted by a concert of Irish traditional music which I attended with my son, Klajd, at the Royal TF Hotel. The concert was to raise funds for St Dominic's Home for the Elderly and Day Care Centre in Newport. Joe Byrne, the master of ceremonies, was very funny. When introducing the first act, a group called 'The Border Collies', he got the audience to bark like sheepdogs. Later when one of the acts was slow to arrive on stage, he filled the gap by reciting a wonderful poem by one of my favorite Irish poets Patrick Kavanagh.

One of the acts which greatly took my fancy was a performance by the famous accordion player Joe Burke. He is popularly known as a ‘box player’, or ‘bosca ceoil’ player in Irish, according to my friend Christy Loftus, one of the concert organizers. Joe Burke has a white whiskery beard. He would make a great Santa Claus. Now and again, he makes droll comments such as: “I hope you like this tune. If you don’t, I will play it again”. Mr. Burke is a big hit as is his wife Ann Conroy Burke, the smiling lady with a big bun of hair on her head, who accompanies him on the guitar.

Two elderly men, the Lennon brothers, played some old tunes on their violins in beautiful harmony. Their bows hit the strings like bees alighting on summer flowers. But the liveliest and most enjoyable act of all, for both Klajd and me, was a slim young man in jeans called Seán Keane who played the whistle and sang. Klajd's music teacher in St Partick's National School was sitting beside him and they had a great chat. I expect Klajd will take an even greater interest in his tin whistle classes from now on.

When we went home at the end of the night, I found myself reflecting on how the majority of Irish musical instruments are similar to those in my home country. Albanian folk music is national in character but

also has some Turkish and Persian influences. It sounds typically Balkan, but mainly polyphonic in the south and homophonic in north and central Albania. Music is played on folk instruments such as the cifteli (a long-necked two-stringed mandolin) and the gërnetë (a type of clarinet for popular music). Other instruments are the gajda and bishnica (wind instruments) and the sharkia and lahuta (stringed ones).

3rd March 2005

I went to Davitt College to meet Joseph McGowan, a teacher there and editor of the *Davitt News* newsletter. I have been producing this fortnightly newsletter with Transition Year students since September 2004. It is very nice to have an editor like Joseph. He is a great teacher and his desk is always groaning with pages of information, photos, poems, and short stories. He collects written work from the students and makes suggestions on how it could be improved for inclusion in the newsletter.

Today Joseph told me about his idea to feature graduates of the College in the newsletter. He has worked tirelessly to find their addresses and plans to send a letter and a copy of *Davitt News* to each, asking

them to write an article about their own post-college experiences. Their stories should make worthwhile reading and hopefully will prove inspiring to the present crop of students.

4th March 2005

Eugene Burns, a student at Castlebar College of Further Education, was asking me about the Albanian language and I tried to explain to him all I knew about it. When I told him I received an honours degree in 1988 for teaching the Albanian language and literature, he suggested I write an article about the Albanian language. I promised him I would. When I went home later I sat at my computer for hours writing down all I could about my own language.

The Albanian language is not derived from any other language. It does not have a Slavic or Greek base as is commonly believed but is in fact one of the nine original Indo-European languages. The other eight Indo-European languages are Armenian, Balto-Slavic, Germanic, Hellenic, Indian, Iranian, Latin, and Celtic. As such, Albanian is one of Europe's oldest languages. The Albanian alphabet is Latin based and similar to that of English except that it is comprised of 36 letters including

e and ‡ and nine digraphs (dh, gj, ll, nj, rr, sh, th, xh, and zh) which are regarded as single characters. The Albanian alphabet does not have the letter w.

The Albanians are essentially a homogenous people but have been divided traditionally into two basic groups: the Gegs in the North; and the Tosks in the South - the dividing line being the Shkumbini River which runs west-east almost across the centre of Albania. Both Gegs and Tosks speak the same language but pronounce it with some differences. A simple example is the Albanian word for the English verb 'is'. A Tosk would say 'është' (EH-shtah), whereas a Geg would pronounce it 'asht'(AH-sht). The Tosk dialect is the official dialect of the entire country.

The Connaught Telegraph 9 March 2005

‘I was so happy after reading my poetry for the first time to an Irish audience…’

7th March 2005

Tonight, for the first time since arriving in Ireland, I read my poems to an audience. The occasion was Poetry Night in association with Poetry Ireland and the venue was the Linenhall Arts Centre, Castlebar. First, three local poets were invited to read their work, a woman from Newport, next myself, then a woman from Ballina. My hands were shaking. I was nervous but happy, because after three years in this town I was finally going to read my translated poems to Irish people. I read them very slowly, trying to pronounce every word properly. I think I did well.

After the local poets it was poet Moya Cannon’s turn to read. Moya Cannon was born in Dunfanaghy, Co Donegal and currently lives in Galway. Her first collection of poetry, *Oar*, was published in 1990, and won The Brendan Behan Memorial Prize. Her second collection, *The Parchment Boat*, was published in 1997. Moya has given many poetry readings in Ireland, Brittany, Germany and Austria and has been published in many international journals and anthologies. She has also

broadcast on RTE radio and TV and on BBC Radio, and has edited *Poetry Ireland Review*. The poems she read at tonight's event were excellent.

When Poetry Night was over, we went to the pub for a short drink. There, Moya Cannon asked me about my own country. She told me that Scotland is called Alba in the Celtic language. I had read something about that before but didn't think there was any real link between Albania and Scotland.

8th March 2005

Today I spent hours scouring the Internet and pouring over books trying to see if indeed there was any connection between Albania and Scotland. I discover the name Albania is of considerable antiquity, dating back perhaps to the pre-Celtic alb (hill), taken from Alps or possibly from the Indo-European alb (white) taken from albino and Albion. Byzantine historian Michael Attaints was the first to refer to the Albanians as having taken part in a revolt against Constantinople in 1043 and to the Arbanitas as subjects of the duke of Dyrrachium. The tab-Albanians and the Albanian minorities (still present in Greece) have been referred to in various ways over time: Arbenuer, Arbttnor, Arbeneshe and Arbreshe.

The Albanian name of the country 'Shqipëria' translates into English as 'Land of the Eagles'. No surprise then that there is a large presence of these birds in the mountainous zones of Albania. This would also explain the two-headed bird on the national flag and emblem.

I know that during a visit of former Albanian communist dictator Enver Hoxha to the Soviet Union, Stalin asked his employees if Caucasian Albania had something to do with the present Albania. Actually Stalin himself came from Georgia and Georgians claim that they are descendants of Caucasian Albanians. But the answer to Stalin's question was that Caucasian Albanian and the present Albania have nothing to do with each other except for the similarity of the names.

There is a theory that the Scots came originally from Albania. Indeed, I have read that the Albanian surname 'Tare' in Celtic Scottish means, 'those who have not returned'.

9th March 2005

Here in Ireland, I have found many traditions similar to those in my own country. Additionally, there

are not just similar customs but also similar types of clothes.

I think it is more than coincidence, for example, that the kilt is worn in both Scotland and Albania. True, there is little comparison between the design of the 'fustanella' (or, to give it its full name, 'Fustanella e Fameshme e Shqipetarit) and the tartan-patterned kilt of the Scottish clans, but isn't it strange that even the two countries' clan systems bear a remarkable resemblance.

The Hungarian sociologist, Baron Nopcsa, believed that the Albanian or Illyrian kilt set the original pattern for the Roman military dress and because of its similarity to the Celtic kilt he also theorized that the Roman legions in Britain through the presence of its Illyrian element could have started the fashion among the Celts. The Albanian kilt was common dress for men in the 13th Century, when it was regularly worn by a tribe of Dalmatians, one of the Illyrian ancestors of the Albanians. At that time the kilt was called 'Dalmatica'.

But theories exist that the kilt had its origins during much earlier times as a long shirt called 'linja' which, when gathered at the waist by a sash, gave the appearance of a knee or calf-length kilt. Depending on the social status of the wearer, materials used in fabricating the fustanella (thereby defining the number of pleats) ranged from

coarse linen or woollen cloth for villagers to luxurious silks for the more affluent. Although the kilt was worn by men throughout Albania, today it is seen only on special occasions in southern Albania, especially in the Gjirokaster area and in the Albanian regions of Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia and Greece.

The Albanian and Scottish clan systems have a number of similarities too. Noel Malcolm makes reference to them in his book, *Kosovo: A Short History*: '. . at some time in the sixteenth century the Ottoman authorities gave up trying to impose their normal administrative or feudal system, letting the clans run their own affairs in virtual zones of self-government instead.'

Curiously, the development of the clan system in Scotland was taking place at precisely the same time and for much the same reason - a breakdown of central power and feudal structures in the 15th and 16th Centuries. Scottish clans also developed the idea of common ancestry.

But back to the kilt. Two noted writers have referred to it in their work.

Lord Byron in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* observed the "Albanian kirtled to the knee" while T. S. Finlay in *Travels*

through Greece and Albania states unequivocally that 'it was the fame of the Albanians which induced the modern Greeks to adopt the Albanian kilt as their national costume.'

The Connaught Telegraph 16 March 2005

Ever growing Castlebar needs an urban transport system

16th March 2005

One of the things that constantly amazes me about Castlebar is its continuing growth. Older residents tell me that 60 years ago it was a very quiet place with a few donkey and horse carts competing for space on Main Street with just the odd motor vehicle here and there. Now the town is bustling. Housing estates are creeping out into the countryside and gobbling up what once used to be farmland. I have no firm statistics on this but the population of the town and adjacent countryside must now be around the 15,000 marks. Every weekday morning as I make my way to J classes in Castlebar College for Further Education I notice the cars, lines and lines of them, tail backing at the town's traffic lights. So many cars, so few passengers. I often ask myself why there is no organised transport system. Such a large and developing town surely deserves one. Look at the flood of people who travel every day to work for the large-scale employers such as the Mayo General Hospital, Mayo County Council, the GMIT, the many factories, not to mention the hundreds of small firms who employ perhaps between 10 and 40 workers each. Many people

don't have cars so a public transport system would fulfill two needs. It would provide transport for those who have no private means of transport and it would take vehicles off the road making Castlebar an even more agreeable place.

One of the things I have noticed since coming here is that Castlebar has a busy nightlife. Taxis provide a good service but they can be expensive. As a result, I believe that despite the strict drinking laws some people are tempted to drink and drive. If there was an alternative to taxis such as a public transport system, I think a lot of people would avail of it. Come on Mayo County Council! How about an initiative on urban transport in the county?

17th March 2005

St. Patrick's Day dawns bright and clear. At least it is much brighter and milder than some of the days that have gone before. For my Irish friends I am glad their national feast day will be marked by fine weather. For weeks all the talk has been about the parade. The word I find in my dictionary to best describe the mood is 'ebullience'. The questions mostly go like this. Will it rain? Will the sun shine? Will there be many floats? Will

there be many bands? Will there be much entertainment for the children? Nobody need have worried about the quality or turnout at the Caslebar parade - it seemed like every man, woman and child in the area was there even though there were plenty of competing parades in the region. The theme of the parade, which set off from the industrial estate (beside McHale Park) at 3 p.m. was 'The Wearing of the Green'. Most people seemed to take it literally such was the amount of greenery in the form of shamrocks, paper hats and green clothing. Amongst the happy throngs at the parade, I sensed a mood of patriotism about being Irish. Afterwards the celebrations began and the pubs and restaurants did a booming trade until about midnight. The next day, however, I noticed curious, pale yellow, circular spots on the pavements and streets - patches of vomit. What a pity that for some, a glorious, musical, happy day became an opportunity for over-indulgence.

18th March 2005

Following the excitement of St. Patrick's Day I got thinking about similar types of celebrations in my own country, Albania. During the Communist era in my own country the armed forces would have parades. In post-communist times there were small scale parades to

celebrate the national day (Independence Day) in November. Today, leaders like the Prime Minister and President hold small meetings to mark the day and that's all. Other Albanians however, wherever they are located in the world, joyously commemorate Albanian Independence Day (Dita e Flamurit) every year on November 28th. It was on that day in 1912 in the Albanian seacoast town of Viora that the venerable Albanian patriot, Ismail Qemali, first raised the Albanian red and black, double-headed eagle flag and proclaimed Albanian independence from the Ottoman Turks after almost 500 years.

Albanian Christians celebrate the traditional holidays of Christmas and Easter too while Albanian Muslims observe Ramadan and other religious holidays. Whereas other peoples in the Balkans refer to themselves as Christians or Muslims, an Albanian invariably says, "I am an Albanian", rather than a 'Christian' or a 'Muslim'. One other Albanian celebration is Dita e Veres (Spring Day), which derives from an ancient pagan holiday, and is still celebrated in mid-March every year.

The Connaught Telegraph 23 March 2005

New opening hours needed for library

23rd March 2005

Eighteen months ago, a friend of mine, Ernie Sweeney, asked if I used the library. My reply was: 'Yes I do, I go there every single day. The library is my church.' When I was not going to the College, the library really was my church. Currently I have no time to go there every day but I do every weekend. The people who are working there are very nice and very helpful. It is a modern library and the services it provides are very good. But I think it would be very beneficial for the 'weekend' community if the library were open not just on Saturday but also on Sunday. Moreover, for weekdays I think it is very important that the library stays open up to 9 o'clock in the evening. This is because people need to use these public services after they have finished their own work. People go there to take out books and use the Internet and there is no charge. This is a wonderful thing. Castlebar has two Internet Cafes but not everyone can go there because they cost too much. So, if the County Council decided that the Mayo County Library should stay open for weekend days and late evenings this public service would be very useful for many citizens and for students who do

not have enough money to use the services of the Internet cafes.

24th March 2005

Last night I read some very interesting news. Out of every ten migrants here in Ireland, four of them had third level education but their skills were not being used. I know that here in Castlebar, for example, there are hundreds of foreigners with honours degrees attained in their own countries but who cannot make use of them because they do not know enough English. Either the Government is paying for their unemployment assistance or they are working in menial jobs. If there were facilities for learning the English language here in Castlebar they would be able to take up their own professions again after six months or a year.

This morning I am on a mission as I call to the library and log onto the Internet. I am looking for information on educating refugees and wondering what facilities are out there. In one of the Government's websites, I see that refugees in Ireland are entitled to free third level (university or college) education and adult refugees may have free English language classes. However, here in Castlebar, there is just one option to learn

English for free and that involves going to the Citizen Information Centre in Cavendish House and attending just one lesson per week. I think this is very little for people who really want to learn English properly.

25th March 2005

Today I meet some Irish friends to discuss a proposal for an EU Celebration of Cultural Diversity. We are hoping this open-air celebration will take place in mid-summer (Bonfire Night) and consider the grounds of Turlough Park House as a location. What an ideal venue this would be if we could secure it. We decided that a central theme for this event would be recognising the new Eastern European, Oriental, African and North and South American influences in our community. More about this as plans unfold.

The Connaught Telegraph 30 March 2005

Church on Croagh Patrick badly in need of a lick of a paintbrush

25th March 2005

It is Good Friday, one of the most important days in the calendar of the Catholic Church. Today I fulfill a personal promise to climb Croagh Patrick which I am told is Ireland's 'holiest mountain'. With me is my 12-year-old son, Klajd, and a Castlebar friend, Johnny Oosten. Johnny has been up and down the mountain more times than the sheep that graze its slopes and he is just as nimble. Since coming to Castlebar I have heard and read many stories about the history of the mountain - how St Patrick spent 40 days and nights praying on the summit was one of them. I found it a difficult climb with the coming down worse than going up. I still have aches in the backs of my legs from the effort. It was no problem though for either Klajd or Johnny. The last stretch was a bit hellish with broken stones everywhere which moved back an inch or two with every step we took forward. It was a relief to emerge on the summit's plateau and take in the wonderful vista of islands which dot Clew Bay. I found the church on top to be a bit of a disappointment with the walls all scratched and flaking. I know it must be

difficult keeping an old church in top condition, especially as it is perched in such an inaccessible place. Johnny, who is good with a paintbrush, commented also on the condition of its exterior and told me he'd love to paint it if he could get permission from the Catholic Church. Perhaps some kindly paint supplier would like to donate some of their products for what would be a very worthy project.

There were many other climbers on the mountain. The place was like the United Nations. There were Irish, English, Scottish, Australian, Spanish and American climbers amongst the groups we met as we ascended and descended. One man stood out for me, however, and his name was John Kilgarriff from Dunmore. John is nearly 80 years old and climbs the mountain every month as it gives him a spiritual lift to do so. When we reached the bottom, I was tired and remarked on the spur of the moment that a cable car from Murrisk or Lecanvey to the summit would be a great attraction and benefit.

I don't really believe that though. As one old pilgrim said: "The only way to get into the Heaven is the hard way. There are no escalators."

28th March 2005

Every single day I am learning something new about how generous Irish people are and to be honest with you I feel lucky to live in this country and to be a part of these kind people. A friend of mine rang today to tell me that a team of medical staff from Galway will travel to Albania on 9th April for a two week 'operating marathon' in which they hope to help at least 50 patients. He said the trip, led by Galway based consultant plastic surgeon Jack McCann, is being organised by a newly founded charity called Friends of Albania Ltd. The impetus for the trip originated with the treatment of a four-year-old Albanian girl who was brought to Galway for treatment through the Children First Foundation, he said. While her condition has greatly improved, she needs further help and it is hoped that many more children and adults like her who are suffering from congenital malformations, burns, scars, and post-traumatic injuries, will also benefit from this 'operating marathon'.

The Galway medical team includes two surgeons, two anaesthetists, seven nurses, and a person responsible for instrument sterilization. The equipment they need to bring with them includes anaesthetic and surgical equipment, sutures, dressings and medication, according

to my friend. While the trip is expected to cost in the region of €50,000, the cost can be considerably reduced if the equipment needed is sponsored or donated. He told me that the medical personnel involved are offering their expertise free of charge and that an urgent fundraising campaign was underway to fund the trip. Thank you, Ireland - you have come up trumps twice for me once, personally, when I arrived here with my family and now you are helping my people.

30th March 2005

I receive an e-mail from a student living in Westport and studying in Castlebar. 'Dear Sir,' it begins, 'I read your article in the *Connaught Telegraph* on transport in Castlebar and the need to improve it. I agree with you on this matter and I believe it is long overdue. My own concern is with the present bus service between Westport and Castlebar. It is far too infrequent. I go to College in Castlebar five days per week and finish at four o'clock and then I have to wait until 5.20pm for a bus back to Westport. There is no bus service between 1.30pm and 5.20pm in the afternoon, a period of four hours. This is not satisfactory and needs to be improved'.

Good to see that in my modest campaign to have public transport provided in the Castlebar area I have an ally.

The Connaught Telegraph 13 April 2005

Days of mourning for Pope: Communist Cuba 3, Catholic Ireland 0

8th April 2005

The funeral of Pope John Paul II was the biggest funeral in history. I think he deserved it because he was a great Pope. However, over the last few days I have been pondering a small mistake made by many journalists. They claimed Pope John Paul II was the first non-Italian Pope for more than 450 years. That is not true, because there was an Albanian Pope from l700 to 1721. His name was Pope Clement Xl (Gianfranco Albani (1649-1721). Incidentally, a quick search of the Internet proves there were three more Popes of Albanian origin, namely San Eleuterlo (175-189), San Caio (283-296) and San Giovani IV (640-642).

I was surprised about the mixed opinion on the National Day of Mourning dedicated to the death of Pope John Paul II. In Ireland, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern announced there would be “no national day of mourning as such”. The public’s reply was speedy and angry. I was listening to different radio stations and there were thousands of callers demanding a national day of mourning, especially as this was a Pope so dearly loved by the

Irish people. In response to this outcry the Taoiseach said he had 'no problem with people calling it a day of mourning'. When two polls, one on a radio programme and one on TV3, showed that 81% and 93% respectively voted in support of a National Day of Mourning, Mr. Ahern quickly clarified his position, saying that schools would be allowed to close on the day and state employees could take time off work to attend church services. That was the sum total of Ireland's remembrance and mourning, a country where 95 % of the population are Roman Catholic. I have been comparing this response to other countries all over the world where national days of mourning were declared as follows: Poland - six days; Portugal - three days; Brazil - seven days; Albania - one day; Kosovo (where 90% of population are Muslim) - two days; Cuba (a Communist state) - three days. These facts do not need any further comment.

9th April 2005

Today I read an old copybook containing my notes about Pope John Paul II's 1993 visit to Albania. At the time I was working as a journalist for a national newspaper. Albania was the first Balkan country visited by Pope John Paul II after the collapse of Communism. During that visit the Pope nominated four Albanian

bishops. During the Communist regime Albania was the first atheist state on the planet.

Prior to Pope John Paul II's visit I interviewed a priest who had spent 18 years in jail. Here, I am going to translate and share my notes from that interview:

> *The Albanian Church triumphed at a high price. Out of 156 priests that existed before the persecution began, 65 were martyred and 64 died during or after imprisonment. Tens of thousands of the common people perished for religious reasons. Slow torture took many forms in the prisons camps. Most of the priests were beaten on their bare feet with wooden clubs. The fleshy part of their legs and buttocks were cut open, rock salt was then inserted beneath the skin and the open skin then sewn up again. Their feet were placed in boiling water until the flesh fell off and were then rubbed with salt; their Achilles' tendons were pierced with hot wires. Some were hung by their arms for three days without food; partially immersed in icy water until nearly frozen; had electrical wires placed in their ears, nose and mouth; burning pine needles placed under fingernails. Other forms of torture involved being*

forced to eat a kilo of salt and having water withheld for 24 hours; boiled eggs were put in their armpits; teeth were pulled without anesthetic; they were tied behind vans and dragged; left in solitary confinement without food or water until almost dead; forced to drink their own urine; placed in pits of excrement up to their necks; laid on a bed of nails and covered with heavy material; put in nail-studded cages which were then rotated rapidly.

I have saved this copybook for many years and now have decided to translate my notes and publish them because I think no nation passed through a worse trial in the 20th Century than Albania did. As Pope John Paul II said during his 1993 visit to Albania, 'History has never seen before what happened in Albania. Dear Albanians, your drama must interest the whole European continent. Europe must not forget."

The Connaught Telegraph 20 April 2005

‘Coming to Live in Mayo’ is a very useful book but it needs to be promoted

15th April 2005

When I moved from Albania to Mayo three years ago, it was in many ways like transferring to another planet. I knew nothing about the education here, nor anything about the employment, accommodation, social welfare, money matters or health services here. Three years on and these matters still remain much of a mystery to me. It is the same, I presume, for all the new migrants to modern Ireland. So it was with great relief and pleasure that I received a presentation pack today at a function in the TF Royal Hotel and Theatre from my friend Tomas Lally who is Development Manager for Mayo Citizens’ Information Service. The main item in the pack was a copy of “*Coming to Live in Mayo - A Practical Guide*”. The book is now my bible. It contains a wealth of information about essential services which I imagine will be as useful to the native Irish person as it will to me. The launch was carried out by John Waters, the author and journalist. The fact that this book has been published makes me feel even warmer inside about my adopted country. It is like handing me and my family a greeting card proclaiming, “YOU ARE WELCOME TO SHARE YOUR

LIVES WITH US IN IRELAND. HERE IS A PUBLICATION WHICH MAY MAKE YOUR EXISTENCE HERE A LITTLE BIT EASIER." I am a little concerned, however that this valuable book, the first of its kind in Ireland I'm told, may not reach the entire audience for which it is intended. I think it would be very beneficial if the Mayo Citizens' Information Service was to hold a meeting or seminar to which all non-nationals living in the county were invited. I hope my suggestion is acted upon.

18th April 2005

It was a great feeling to receive a letter today from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, (Reception and Integration Agency), and UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency) inviting me to a poetry competition. Worldwide, refugees flee terrible persecution every day. They are forced to seek protection in countries often far from their own and start anew. Refugees are ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, making the best of newfound freedoms, the opportunity to live in safety and of being valued for their contribution. Along with many other countries, Ireland will participate in World Refugee Day on 2nd June 2005. This is an opportunity, according to the letter I received, to reflect on the difficulties faced by refugees

and to celebrate the positive aspects of 'new beginnings' as refugees settle into new homes and new countries. Poetry Ireland UNHCR and the Reception and Integration agency wish to mark the positive aspects of new beginnings by inviting submissions for a poetry competition. I picked three of my best poems and forwarded them. I don't care about winning any prizes but I am extremely happy because, thanks to these kind people, I am not any more just a number.

20th April 2005

In St Patrick's School in Castlebar there are 19 pupils from asylum seeking and refugee families. These pupils hail originally from Nigeria, Congo, Zimbabwe, Ukraine, Albania, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova, Cameroon, and Kazakhstan. They therefore represent approximately seven different languages, and many different faiths such as Christian, Catholic, Muslim and Born Again Christian. In general, they are getting on quite well. For their first couple of years in school they receive forty minutes of language support daily from the resource teacher for non-nationals. These children add to the experience of the school. The other children love to hear stories of their countries and to learn about their language, culture etc. For example, one of the pupils grew up in a mud hut in

Zimbabwe and he has told his classmates of his experiences there. I asked Ms. Lane, a teacher in the school, if there was any special programme for involving the children in the local community.

She told me the support teachers for non-nationals follow the Integrate Ireland Language and Training programme (IILT), a programme designed for second language learners. Moreover, she said the children take part in hurling, rugby, football, and soccer at school with teachers and coaches from the local clubs training them. They are then encouraged to join the local sports clubs.

Also, the children are given the opportunity to learn music and they represent the school in the St Patrick's Day Parade. Some children also perform in the school choir. All children are encouraged to join the local library and regularly go with their classes during and after school hours.

As part of the Green Schools Project the children are encouraged to recycle both at home and at school. The Irish children are very accepting of the children from refugee and asylum-seeking families.

These immigrants add an extra dimension to the school in terms of their language, music, and culture.

Their parents also integrate well into the school system, despite the language barriers.

The Connaught Telegraph 27 April 2005

St. Patrick's N.S. in Castlebar raised € 1,000 for Bóthar

24th April 2005

Today heartening news reaches me via a calendar that my son, Klajd, brings home with him from St Patrick's National School. I learn that the school has donated €1,000 to an Irish organisation which supplies farm animals such as goats, in-calf heifers and cows to rural families in poorer countries. Compared to Ireland, rural Albania is a poor place.

I would imagine that conditions in Ireland 60 years ago when horses were used to plough the land and there was very little agricultural machinery were very similar to those which exist in many parts of my native country today. Since my son brought home the Bóthar information pack from school, I have been researching the organisation.

Bóthar in Ireland is part of a community of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) using livestock in development aid. Just two months ago this organisation sent 67 in-calf heifers to Tirana. The heifers came from all over Ireland and were dispatched from Shannon airport in late February. This was the sixth consignment

of Irish heifers to be sent to needy families in Albania since 1999. These heifers will help alleviate the suffering and poverty of some families and bring them out of the poverty trap. All the recipient families are sufficiently trained in the upkeep of the animals and are capable in the provision of shelter of hay and silage making. Each family must have these requirements in place before they can receive an animal. Great thanks is due to all volunteers and all the people who donated money and heifers towards this airlift to Albania, and also to all the farmers who took a day out of their busy schedules to bring the heifers to Limerick. Bóthar delivered 70-in-calf dairy heifers to 70 impoverished families in Kosovo just in time for Christmas in late December 2004. These families are living around villages in the Gjakove region. The dairy heifers, all spring-clavers, will each help a family to rebuild their lives following the devastating war. On behalf of my people, I say "Thank you, Ireland".

26th April 2005

Every time I visit the Country Life Museum in Turlough Park, Castlebar, I feel as if I am visiting a museum in my own country. Many objects on display are similar to those which would be found in a museum back home. On my last trip to the museum I saw a small loom,

which had been used to create colourful rugs for floors as well as sweaters, socks, gloves and so forth.

Albanian women and even girls as young as six-years-old have always been praised for their intricate embroideries (qendisje) which decorate their dwellings. Indeed, in preparation for their dowries, several young women will get together to make beautiful doilies (centro) to place on furniture. Using a small loom (vegel) they create multi-coloured floor rugs and with other hand tools produce knitwear such as hats, scarfs, jumpers and so on using wool, cotton, acrylics and 'Pune me grep' (lacemaking) is a traditional folk-art form that has been passed down from generation to generation. Men usually work with metals such as copper, brass, and aluminium to craft decorative plates, wall hangings and utensils like they did here in Ireland did years ago. Portraits of Skanderbeg abound as well as pastoral scenes featuring the beautiful mountains and lakes of Albania. The capital Tirana is becoming recognisable thanks to the number of delicate pen-and-ink drawings that depict it, not to mention other versions in acrylic, watercolour, and oil. Regular hobbies such as stamp-collecting, birdwatching, plants, butterfly collecting, storytelling, etc., are favourite pastimes all over Albania.

Women were previously relegated to a secondary role to men in Albania, especially to the eldest son. They were taught by the age of 10 to get ready for marriage by preparing dowries, but that procedure was largely abandoned by 1950 even though some Albanians occasionally practice it still. In olden days Albanians could identify each other by the way they dressed because each region had its own characteristic style of clothing which was influenced by ethnic tradition and religion and differentiated by clan (fis), sex, and age. In medieval times, Albanians tended to spend a remarkably high proportion of their income on dress. Lord Byron, visiting southern Albania in 1805 (where he wrote a good portion of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*), called Albanian dress 'the most wonderful in the world.' Nowadays this type of distinctive clothing may be seen chiefly at theatrical or folkdance performances.

The Connaught Telegraph 4 May 2005

Irish plastic surgeons perform 'miracles' in Albania

28th April 2005

Seventy Albanian patients were operated on and another 160 visited by the Galway-based plastic surgery team in their mission to my native country. Sixteen members of this team returned from Albania just two weeks ago. A friend of mine who worked with this team in Tirana stated that 'a very successful mission was completed.' The Galway team worked extremely hard in the national (and only) plastic surgery centre in Albania's capital city Tirana and both Albanian and Irish medical teams collaborated to accomplish this vital work. He said that many patients and their families had queued from very early in the morning and travelled for up to six hours, often on foot, after hearing of the visit through local and national media. All types of patients were seen including those with burn scars resulting in severe contractures of the face and limbs, those with birth malformations of the face or hands, as well as those with advanced skin cancer. Some of the team also visited and helped at a home for 45 homeless children ranging in age from 1-17 years. They provided some new clothes, shoes, food, and medicine. My friend who was there said these 45 children are sleeping in three bedrooms and two living

rooms. The team planned to help these children get a bigger house with a garden to play in. This team brought a truckload of surgical equipment and supplies to Albania including two anaesthetic machines donated by the Bon Secours Hospital in Galway and other equipment from the University College Hospital Galway and Crumlin Hospital, Dublin. Another surgical team from Galway will come to Albania to continue this work and other Irish specialists have offered to come to Albania and undertake similar work in their field. All patients and their families were very thankful to the team and to all the Irish people who had contributed so generously to this fund to make this mission possible. My friend said the medical personnel involved were offering their expertise free of charge and that a fundraising campaign was already underway to fund the next trip.

2nd May 2005

The symbiosis between Irish and the foreigners is now a well-known fact and I think the symbiosis between the Irish and the Jews is the supreme thing that illustrates how generous Irish people are.

Religious toleration and social non-discrimination exists in the Irish Republic and Jews have prospered with

the absence of such barriers. However, it is a little-known fact worldwide that the Albanians protected their own Jews during the Holocaust while also offering shelter to other Jews who had escaped into Albania from Austria, Serbia, and Greece.

The names of Muslim and Christian Albanian rescuers of Jews are commemorated as 'Righteous Among the Nations' at the Yad Vashem Memorial in Jerusalem and are inscribed on the famous 'Rescuers Wall' at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. At the presentation of the names of Albanian rescuers, the museum's director, Miles Lerman, gratefully stated, 'Albania was the only country in Europe which had a larger Jewish population at the end of the war than before it!'

A joint Israeli-Albanian concert was held in Tirana on 4th November, 1995 to commemorate the protection of Jews by Albanians from Nazi occupiers of Albania during the Holocaust. Its participants were the Kibbutz Orchestra of Israel, the Opera Orchestra of Tirana, the National Choir of Tirana and the Israel-Albania Society.

Here in Ireland, there is a museum called The Irish Jewish Museum and I went to visit it last year. It is located at 3-4 Walworth Road in the Portobello section of Dublin, the old Jewish Quarter of the city. A modest museum, the

first floor is devoted to a pictorial and literary account of the Irish Jewish community, while the Old Synagogue occupies the second floor, which is no longer in use. It's a shame we have no museum like this in Albania where these great things can be shown.

The Connaught Telegraph 4 May 2005

The government needs to do more to increase its state sponsored childcare schemes

9th May 2005

A friend of mine who has two children was telling me that he had found a job for his wife. However, if she was going to take the job, she would need to pay about two times her income in childcare fees. I was surprised to hear this and it got me thinking. I think the government needs to do more to increase its state sponsored childcare schemes. The emphasis needs to be on early childhood care and education and this should be looked at in more detail as part of the social development strategy. Of equal importance is allowing parents to play an active role in the workforce which, in turn, also means adopting a pro-employment stance. As an alternative there should also be systems put in place that help and support parents in their parenting role and provide both an opportunity for the transmission of values as well as a stimulating environment in which children can learn, develop and grow.

Modern society now demands a complex approach to childcare and parents should have several options to choose from in order to best suit their own

requirements. My friend told me that the cost of childcare here in Castlebar tends to decrease as the hours required by families increases. The most expensive is the hourly cost (€8) to mind school-going children for less than 10 hours a week. This may however be due in part to the additional costs associated with collecting children from school and providing other facilities.

While this statement may be true there is anecdotal evidence that explains the perceived increase in cost for caring for school-aged children. It appears that private child minders operating in the black economy are demanding €100 per child per week, 52 weeks a year, regardless of the hours worked. From this it can be seen that as the carers' hours fall the relative cost per hour rises.

12th May 2005

My daughter Najada is in first class and she very much likes the Irish language. She knows Irish better than her brother who is in fifth class and I am proud of her because I read that for more than 700 years Irish people were not allowed to learn their own language. Now that we are living in modern Ireland there is nothing preventing her from learning to speak Irish perfectly.

Therefore, I think nowadays every Irish person in the nation should be passionate about learning their own language as part of their own history and culture. Moreover, learning Irish is free in every school. My own country had a similar fate for hundreds and hundreds of years during the Ottoman occupation. Education in Albania has been stimulated and nurtured by nationalistic roots. It is supposed to have been developed in Albania during Illyrian times chiefly for military and physical purposes. Under the Ottoman repression for almost 500 years the teaching of the Albanian language was strictly forbidden, and Albanians of the then Greek Orthodox religious faith were required to attend Greek schools, while Catholics were taught Italian or Austrian German and Muslims taught Turkish.

The opening of the first school in 1887 to teach in the Albanian language was a landmark. The first Albanian language elementary school for girls was opened in 1892. Higher education in Albania really began when the American Vocational School (Shkolla Teknike), established originally by the American Red Cross in 1921 and which eventually became part of the University of Tirana, was founded in 1957. Other institutes of higher education were located in North and South of Albania. Since the overthrow of Communist power in 1992, these

institutes have changed to universities and new universities have been founded in South Albania. Albania has one of the highest literacy ratings in the Balkans (88%).

The Connaught Telegraph 4 May 2005

Musings on Castlebar's 'French Market' and the lack of English classes in Mayo for migrants

20th May 2005

I like mostly everything about Ireland, with a few exceptions. The weather is disappointing, apart from a few weeks in summer. This can be hard for someone like me who comes from a Mediterranean type climate where the sun shines strongly for four or five months of the year. I find the food here also a bit of a let-down. I always read that Ireland was an agricultural country so it was a bit of a surprise when I came here to find so many untilled fields and so many people eating mostly processed foods bought in the shop or local supermarket. Often, I long for native Albanian dishes such as lakror (a mixture of eggs, vegetables, or meat, and butter encased in thin, multi-layered pastry sheets, or fergese (a dish frequently made with minced meat, eggs, and Ricotta cheese). Lamb, rather than beef or pork, is a relatively staple Albanian dish. Albania is also blessed with truly delicious seasonal fruits such as grapes, cherries, figs, watermelon. peaches, quince, and oranges, along with almond, walnut hazelnut, and olive trees that grow in abundance everywhere.

The other week I was delighted to learn that the French Market was coming to my adopted Castlebar for two days. I thought, *'Here will be a rare enough opportunity to excite the taste buds by sampling some international cuisine.'*

How wrong I turned out to be. There were few French products, apart from French bread, on sale in the stalls which covered almost all of the plaza at the Market Square. All around me was Pakistani food, Turkish food, Russian food. There's nothing wrong with these foods except that a French market is hardly the place to market them. To describe the food bazaar in Castlebar some weeks ago as a 'French Market' was, I feel, a little misleading. While discussing Castlebar's so-called 'French Market' with a friend, he asked me about Albanian cuisine. It was a rare opportunity for me to wax long and lyrical about native Albanian dishes. Albania manufactures beer and both red and white wines although the national drink is grappa 'Raki", a clear, colourless brandy produced from grapes.

Albania also produces an award-winning 3-star cognac named 'Skanderbeg' that is prized throughout Europe. Anyway, enough about food and drink. 'Cheers' or, 'Gezuar', as we say in Albania.

25th May 2005

Thousands of migrants in the new Ireland have reasons to be grateful for the fact that Ireland is the only EU state offering equal work and welfare rights to citizens of the 10 new EU member nations. The influx to Ireland continues. I heard recently that there are hundreds of workers from Poland living in Mayo and 32,000 Polish people all over Ireland. Poland has a significantly high unemployment level. I feel sorry for these Polish migrants as most of them know very little English. Most of them have finished university education in their own country but now, because their English is poor, find themselves working in the construction industry. Moreover, as I wrote weeks ago, there is scant opportunity for them to learn English in Mayo. Unlike Ireland, Britain declared restricted access to welfare benefits last year. When 10 new countries became members of the EU, British Prime Minister Mr. Tony Blair said he would consider whether Britain's benefits system was so generous that it would attract unmanageable numbers of immigrants from the former communist countries of Eastern Europe after they joined on 1 May 2004:

'We will take whatever measures are necessary to make sure that the pull factor which might draw people here is closed off,' Blair told the House of Commons last year.

Britain thus becomes the 14th of the 15 existing member states to exercise their right under the accession treaties to restrict immigration from the new members for up to seven years after they join. However, the Irish Government has taken the view that unrestricted access of Eastern Europeans seeking work will be beneficial to the economy.

Most EU governments had indicated they would maintain restrictions on immigration from the new members for at least two years. Ireland, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands initially announced last year that they would welcome workers from the new member states from 1st May 2004 on the same basis as workers from existing member states.

However, three of these have gone back on this position, leaving Ireland as the only member state doing so. Moreover workers coming to Ireland from 10 new EU member states are being treated the same as workers coming from Germany, France, Italy or Spain.

In other words they are being treated the same as Irish citizens. The Irish Government is also giving priority

to Eastern Europeans for work visas/permits over other non-EU nationals. Well done Ireland!

The Connaught Telegraph 1 June 2005

Pirated' DVD's on offer at car boot sale

3rd June 2005

Last week I attended my first car boot sale in Ireland. I went mostly out of curiosity but said I would buy something if it was typically Irish and if it was a bargain. My son Klajd was delighted when he saw some DVDs which cost just €10 each. They were DVD's of movies now showing in the cinemas and Klajd wanted me to purchase them for him. It was easy to see that these DVD's had been copied, or 'pirated' from the original. They were bad quality and I told my son so. I also told him that the people who had copied the DVDs were now selling them illegally. If they had copied them for their own use it would be okay but to copy them and sell them to another person was an unlawful act. From my studies in journalism at Castlebar College of Further Education (CCFE) I know a little about copyright laws here in Ireland. A copyright is the legal right of an author, composer, playwright, and so on, to stop others using their work without permission. I think the people selling these DVDs had no permission to do so. Many people buy counterfeit or pirate products at markets or in foreign holiday resorts and don't view piracy as a serious crime. However, the high profit margins gained from these pirated and

counterfeit products are often used to fund organized crime, paramilitary or terrorist activity. Apart from the poor quality of the goods this is a compelling reason to avoid them. Customs seizures of CDs (audio, games and software) and DVDs at the EU external borders were nearly 25 million for the first half of 2003 - showing just how large the profits of copyright piracy are for organised criminals.

On the other hand, I think nowadays it is important for everyone to know what is allowed. Under the Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000 it is an offence to import, loan, make, and rent or sell unauthorised copies of work for profit. However, copying, importing, or loaning to family and friends for private use is allowed. It is illegal to import, lend, make, possess, rent or sell special equipment to make copies for profit or defeat protection devices (for example, on software) for this purpose. Providing information or services to help other people do these things is also forbidden. Other copyright infringements include public performance as well as broadcasting, playing or showing in public a sound recording, artistic work or original database film.

However, I think it is most important to know about the penalties for these offences. People guilty of these offences can be fined, up to €1.905 euro for each

infringing copy, article, or device on summary conviction (in the District Court).

They might also be imprisoned for up to 12 months. If they are convicted on indictment (in the High Court) the maximum penalty is €126.974, imprisonment for 5 years, or both. Despite these stiff penalties these traders were selling illegally copied DVD's in the heart of Castlebar.

No one was there to say anything to them or explain that they are violating laws and that they can be imprisoned or fined for this. Why aren't the laws implemented?

The Connaught Telegraph 8 June 2005

Finding peace at Ballintubber Abbey

5th June 2005

On a recent Sunday morning I fulfilled my ambition to visit Ballintubber Abbey. I had heard a lot about the place and now I was about to find out a lot more. I arrived just after 9am. The serenity and the stillness of the place were beautiful. There was nobody in the church apart from a man in black with glasses. He was sitting in a small room off the main altar quietly reading his breviary.

This was my first introduction to Fr. Frank Fahey. I had been told he is in many ways the guardian of Ballintubber Abbey. I was also told he was a gifted historian and teller of tales about times past in the Abbey when the waves of Lough Carra lapped against the chapel walls and monks prayed there before Cromwell came with his army and tried to wreck the place. Although time was pressing and he had Masses to celebrate elsewhere, Fr. Fahey was very nice to me, a stranger with broken English. He listened to me attentively and answered my questions patiently.

The area all around the Abbey is now dry land. Fr. Fahey told me of a time in centuries past when one could tie a boat near the church door. He also pointed towards the great mountain in the west, Croagh Patrick, and explained how pilgrims would set off from the Abbey along a twisting path to climb it. The path, I learned later, was called the Tochar Phádraig.

Before he left this kind priest invited me to rest myself and watch a video explaining the long and rich history of the Abbey. I learnt many things over the next hour. I enjoyed my visit. If I hadn't gone, I would not be as well informed about the history of the church in Mayo and the roots of Irish Christianity. Within the Church itself there is a large book where visitors write their names. All of the comments were favourable: 'Splendid', 'Most Educational' and 'Inspiring' were some of the remarks I read from tourists who travelled from places as far as away as Japan, Europe and the United States.

In the grounds of the Abbey, I met many tourists. They were from the USA, England, Germany, France, Spain and Australia. I longed for the knowledge and fluency of Fr. Fahey to be able to tell them that the Abbey claims to be the oldest church in Ireland where there has been continuous religious celebration. It was founded in 1216 by Cathal Crovdearg O'Connor who was the King of

Connacht at the time on the site of a monastic settlement associated with St Patrick. In 1465, the Abbott was investigated for misuse of the Abbey resources but the outcome to this is not known. Clearly Tribunals are not a new phenomenon in Ireland. In 1542 the monastery was dissolved and in 1635 the Augustinians petitioned successfully to take over the Abbey. However, in 1653 Cromwell's troops laid waste to the Abbey, leaving only the shell. Partial restoration works were carried out in 1846 and 1889 but the Abbey was fully restored in time for its 750th anniversary in 1966.

I was really impressed with Ballintubber Abbey and the story behind it and started comparing it a North Albanian church which is the biggest Roman Catholic Church in the Balkans. It too is old but not as old as Ballintubber Abbey. Until the 16th Century almost all of Albania was Christian, the Orthodox religion being dominant in the south and the Roman Catholic in the north. In the 17th Century the Turks began a policy of Islamization by using, among other methods, economic incentives to convert the population. A simple example is that some Albanians who adopted Islam received land and had their taxes lowered.

By the 19th Century, 70% of Albania's population was Islam while some 20% remained Orthodox and 10%

Roman Catholic. These groupings remained in effect until the Communist Government outlawed religion in 1967 making it the world's only atheist state. Freedom of religion in Albania was restored only in 1989-1990 but it must be noted that the overwhelming majority of Albania's population was born under a Communist regime which pursued an aggressively atheistic policy.

Although reliable statistics are lacking observations and anecdotes demonstrate that the historical 70-20-10 percentages are no longer valid. The collapse of the old Communist order has seen a religious revival of sorts and some now believe that the religions with the most new adherents in Albania are Christian Evangelical such as the Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others. The current Albanian government is comprised of Catholic, Muslim and Orthodox members.

The Connaught Telegraph 15 June 2005

A woman with Irish blood was Queen of Albania

17th June 2005

I was having tea with a friend of mine, a former journalist from South Africa. He was telling me about the life of Albania's King Zog's in South Africa. I was impressed with his knowledge on the subject and on returning home started reading a book in the Albanian language about the monarchy in Albania.

I was surprised when I found that a woman with Irish blood was queen of Albania. Her name was Geraldine. She was the wife of King Zog who was first Prime Minister and then President before becoming King of Albania from 1928 to 1939. Geraldine Apponyi was born in Budapest in 1915. Her father was the Hungarian Count Gyula Appoonyi de Nagy-Appony, and her mother was the former Gladys Virginia Stewart, a member of an old Irish-Virginian family. Geraldine's father died in 1924 and after that her mother remarried a French army officer. Her family insisted Geraldine and her two sisters be educated in Hungary

Geraldine was 17 years old when her photograph was taken several times at a ball given by Hungarian

monarchists. She didn't know that one of those pictures would change her life. Albanian monarch King Zog, who was called at that time the Balkan Napoleon, fell in love with Geraldine when he saw a photograph of her. King Zog invited her to Albania. Geraldine's diary entry says she arrived in Albania shortly after Christmas 1937. After accepting his New Year's Day proposal she was made princess. Geraldine stayed a Catholic while her husband King Zog was a Muslim. They got married in a civil ceremony on 27th April 1938. The *New York Herald Tribune* observed that 'Geraldine, 22 years old, seems to be marrying the Rome-Berlin axis as well as her king'. In addition to the Mercedes from Hitler, gifts included copper vases from Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini and a rare cabinet from Spanish dictator Francisco Franco.

On 7th April 1939 Italian troops invaded Albania. Moreover, that day King Zog and Queen Geraldine fled. At that time the immediate pretext for the invasion was the Italian accusation that the king was abusing Italian money. However, many suggested that Mussolini was jealous of Hitler's conquests and that Albania was nearby. Geraldine lived as Queen in Albania for just 15 months. When she and her husband left Albania they had a son Leka (Catholic name) who was just four days old. Though this woman stayed in Albania a very short time

she spoke fluent Albanian for the rest of her life. She was a woman full of energy and a very generous person. When Albania's vice president gave her a velvet pocketbook containing the equivalent of €600,000 as a gift on her wedding she directed that it be given to the National Albanian Charities.

After King Zog and Queen Geraldine left Albania with their son the crown passed to King Victor Emanuel II of Italy and the couple's wanderings began. They passed through Greece, Turkey, Romania, Poland and the Baltic States, Sweden Belgium and France before landing at the Ritz Hotel in London. Once it was clear they would be unable to return to Albania they moved to Egypt where King Farouk welcomed them as exiled royalty. However, when Farouk was overthrown in 1952 they moved to Paris where King Zog, who had survived numerous murder attempts, died in 1961.

After that Queen Geraldine with her son Leka lived in Spain and South Africa. The most interesting thing is that when Geraldine was feeling sick, she wrote a letter to the Albanian Parliament where she asked them to allow her to go back to Albania because her wish was to die and to be buried there for it was a country she loved very much.

After receiving her letter, the Albanian Parliament made a decision to let Queen Geraldine and her son come back.

She was back in Albania just four months before she died on 23rd October 2002. She really deserves to be called an Albanian Queen.

The Connaught Telegraph 22 June 2005

Albania needs to end 'blood feud' tradition if it wants to join EU

12th July 2005

Some weeks ago, I was in Foxford for a function in honour of Admiral Browne, founder of the Argentinean Navy. By chance I met two Argentinean journalists and we had a very nice chat for more than an hour. They asked me about Albania and about the similarities and differences between the Irish and the Albanian people. I told them that the Irish and Albanians have two noticeable things in common. They both like to have a drink and they are both very friendly people. However, I told them about one very important difference between the Irish and the Albanians. The Irish respect their laws and are very strict in imposing them. This is a great thing. I can give one great example to illustrate how respectful the Irish are about their laws. When the smoking ban was imposed here I was sceptical. I thought people would try and get around the new legislation in some way. But, surprise, surprise (for me), from day one, there was no smoking in the pubs.

Back in my native Albania it is so different. I doubt if a smoking ban were applied in Albania tomorrow that

it would be adhered to. In fact, I am certain it wouldn't. Many Albanian citizens are still following an unwritten law called Kanun and they are violating the modern laws. In some parts of Albania, particularly in the north, families follow a code of ethics called the Kanun. The Kanun is not a religious document (Kanun followers may be Christian, Muslim, etc.), but is sacred even so. Its laws reflect many of the unique traditions of the Albanian highlanders. As hard as it is to believe, the Kanun was passed down only orally from generation to generation until the late 1800's when an Albanian priest decided to put it down in writing. Apart from being a great connoisseur of the Kanun himself, he also travelled and reconfirmed its laws in the Albanian Alps with others and hence the law was finally made into a book.

It is said that the Kanun is a book that was first written by a northern Albanian prince Lek Dukagjini, who thought well ahead of his time, while trying to put down or impose the rule of law in the unruly region dominated by the highlander population and its mentality. The Duke (a title he gained in Italy), studied in Venice and when he came back to Albania it is said that he had already comprised a version of the Kanun code of ethics.

Lek Dukagjini used the existing culture and customs in order to map the Kanun code. Some of the caules

professed in the Kanun code are those of respect for women and children, respect for another person's honour, respect for other's property, and especially respect for guests that happen to pass by your lands.

Here is an interesting example of a Kanun law: when someone happens to pass by your lands and needs assistance, even if they are part of the family that you have a blood feud with, you still have to take that person into your home and give them food and shelter and everything they need for their journey home. You are supposed to accompany them to the end of your property line and then warn them that once they are off your lands, they are still 'blood feud' as they were beforehand. You then give them a one hour start before you are allowed to go after them, if that is what you intend to do. The Kanun enforces blood feuds. This code states that if one man kills another 'blood should always be avenged by blood and lays down precise rules for how it should be carried out.

Kanun law was suppressed by Albania's harsh Communist regime but revived when it collapsed in 1991 because in the mountains the laws of the new and weak government were rarely enforced.

However, I think Albanian citizens now need to learn that this traditional law should be just history.

Blood feud killings give a very bad impression of this country - especially at a time when Albania wants to attract more foreign investors and we hope to join the European Union. Nevertheless, it is very hard to get rid of this code because the government there is not doing its job in punishing the guilty. The Argentinean journalist I met in Foxford told me that the blood feud once existed in Argentina and in Ireland but not any longer. My new Argentinian friend informed that one of the prominent institutions or customs among the Celts was the blood feud in which murder or insults against an individual would require an entire clan to violently exact retribution.

The Connaught Telegraph 27 July 2005

Gender change and blood feuds in Albania

6th August 2005

While I was holidaying in Italy last month, I met an Irishman who has seven daughters and one son, the latter being the last of his family. This man had been looking forward to having a son. Perhaps this was due to his upbringing back in Ireland. In olden days baby boys were regarded as more important from a property rights and succession point of view. Nowadays most Irish parents don't care if they just have daughters.

I was happy to tell my new friend how a similar situation used to exist in my home country Albania but that attitudes there have changed also. I told him about an unusual custom in rural parts of northern Albania where girls or women may essentially change their gender to that of a male by taking an oath to become a 'sworn virgin'. Basically, the girl or woman promises to never marry, never bear children and to remain celibate.

She then crops her hair and dresses as a man, adopts the mannerisms of a man, performs a man's labour and is accorded the status and respect deemed worthy of a male.

I told him about this custom which is hundreds of years old and still around. It is thought by scholars to be a response to a shortage of young men to head families. Many young men in the region, for example, are lost to conflict, including blood feuds between family groups. Often, a sworn virgin takes on the masculine role as a child or teenager in order to provide a family with someone who can inherit the family's land. Women are not permitted to inherit land or head a household but a sworn virgin may do both. In other cases, a girl or woman chooses to become a sworn virgin to avoid an unwanted marriage. Marriages are arranged. It's not a bad deal as women in the region are regarded as lesser then men and play a subservient role in the family.

Once a woman takes the oath she really is regarded by the village as a male and may do many things a woman cannot including socialising with other men in rooms women are not permitted to enter (except to serve food). In some cases, the village forgets her true gender. My new friend enquires if the sworn virgin can change her mind and become female again. 'Not really,' I answered. There have been cases of them breaking the oath and even marrying but it's a risky proposition. The oath is taken seriously and to break it brings shame onto the entire family group. Breaking the oath could even initiate a blood feud and place the sworn virgin and male

members of her family at risk of being killed. This may happen in cases where the sworn virgin breaks her oath to marry. Her previous rejected fiancé and his entire family are thus dishonoured and are obliged to avenge the dishonour.

My Italian/Irishman friend told me he has an Albanian friend whose two sons were killed in 1997. After that he said his friend's daughter become a sworn virgin. She promised to never marry, never bear children, and to remain celibate. She then cropped her hair short and began dressing as a man. So there you have it. Customs going back thousands of years still survive in isolated parts of my beloved country.

The Connaught Telegraph 10 August 2005

Employment is crucial for proper integration

18th August 2005

If one is foreign, it is not easy to be part of the community but the thousands of non-nationals in Ireland must try to find work and make a sincere effort to be accepted and valued, at the very least, understood. I think a lot of the apprehension and tension between the Irish and immigrants in modern day Ireland comes from a lack of ability to be direct and open about our thoughts and feelings. I have been living in Ireland for three and a half years with my family. I have made lots of good friends. For me integration is a feeling of normality, about feeling the same way as in my home country, about equal participation and membership in society. However, it is important for immigrants to maintain their own culture whilst integrating fully in their new, adopted, community. In my view inability to communicate is the largest obstacle to integration. Without a working knowledge of English refugees cannot access employment, training or other services. The possibilities for social interaction are limited if not impossible. Employment is also a crucial factor of integration. It is difficult to access the jobs market here. Lack of knowledge of the Irish language is far too often thrown

out as an obstacle or an excuse for not hiring a migrant. I have lost count of the number of times I have been turned down for a job because I did not know the Irish language. This is soul and morale destroying for the job seeker. Lack of equal opportunities in accessing education results in the marginalization of the entire social group. Another thing is recognition of qualifications. Lack of recognition of qualifications is a most important factor preventing refugees from continuing their careers and forcing them to take up employment that does not match their skills.

Other countries have different views about how to take care of refugees. In France integration can be perceived as assimilation. The French government and society view the country as a great homogenous nation with a strong centralised state. All are citizens and thus equally entitled to the formal rights under the law. The British model seems characterised by a more flexible system with a focus on 'race and ethnic relations' rather than 'integration'. There is no significant expectation that immigrants should become good English, Scots or Welsh people. But there is a focus on people being loyal and law-abiding British citizens. In Sweden, the National Integration Office has responsibility for implementing integration policy objectives. Under the Swedish refugee integration programme the municipalities are

responsible for the care of refugees on an individual basis. Under the programme the municipalities aim to give each refugee housing, financial support and a working knowledge of the Swedish language and culture to facilitate the refugee's participation in working and social life.

In Denmark, responsibility for integration lies with the local government whose refugee integration programme consists of language and culture classes and vocational guidance and is available for three years. The programme is obligatory and an allowance is paid to participants.

But I think everyone has to know that all the immigrants come from different backgrounds, faiths and ethnic origins. Yet they rise above differences because they aspire to integration and enjoyment of their uniqueness as a migrant community. By the same token I also believe immigrants want their children to be enriched by the cultural values of their adopted country including learning of its language and traditions while still taking pride in their own identity and dissimilarity.

The Connaught Telegraph 24 August 2005

Ireland is setting the world an example in the way it is treating Muslims

30th August 2005

Irish people are among the most tolerant people in Europe. While other EU nations are treating Muslims very badly the Irish Government has not attracted any anger within the Muslim community. They have taken a more tolerant approach, the welcoming attitude being: 'Not guilty until proven guilty.' But there is a very real fear that the Irish Government might come under pressure from outside and start victimising and picking on Muslims.

There are many mosques in Ireland and moreover there are many more associations like the Muslim Association of Ireland, Islamic Foundation of Ireland, Islamic Cultural Centre in Dublin and many more. So, Irish people should be proud of their tolerance.

I am Catholic myself and I can say that my country Albania was always renowned for being tolerant of other religions. Muslims drank and celebrated Christmas and Easter, Catholics often observed Ramadan, Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic Albanians mixed freely and

without the slightest rancour. Every member of Albania's small Jewish community was hidden from Nazis and Italian fascists.

However, I think no one could forget that Serbia's savagery in Kosovo in 1999 finally exposed one of Europe's darkest secrets - the long racial and religious war against the Muslims of the Balkans. Hatred of Muslims is the 1990's version of the anti-Semitism of the 1930's that led to the extermination of Europe's Jews. Many Europeans were overtly or secretly happy during the Nazi era to be rid of the Jews and in 1999 some modern Europeans actively or tacitly supported the latest campaign by Serbia's Muslim-hating racist regime to impose a 'final solution' to the 'problem' of the Balkan Muslims.' After the Ottoman Empire in Eastern Europe collapsed in 1912 hundreds of thousands of Muslim Turks were slaughtered or driven out. At the end of the Turkish-Greek war 1920-1928, 400,000 Turks were expelled from the Balkans. Simultaneously one million Greeks were driven from Aegean Turkey.

From 1912-1928, large numbers of Slav and Albanian Muslims were expelled from Bosnia, Kosovo, and Serbia. Today, there are almost two million people of Bosnian descent and some one million of Albanian origin living in Turkey.

These vast expulsions still left some Turks, and millions of native Balkan Muslims, the descendants of Serbs, Albanians, Greeks, and Bulgarians who had voluntarily converted to Islam in the 15th and 16th Centuries to escape fierce religious persecution by the Catholic or Orthodox Churches or to avoid a head tax on Christians levied by the Ottomans.

Today there are some 10 million Muslims in the Balkans, nearly three million nominal Muslims in Albania, 2.3 million in Kosovo and Sanxhak, two million in Bosnia; two million in Bulgaria, 180,000 in Greece, and 600-700,000 Muslim Albanians in Macedonia.

In the 1980's Bulgaria expelled 300,000 Muslim citizens and forced the remaining Muslims to Slavicize their names and adopt Orthodox Christianity. A few years later Serbia began attempts to exterminate or drive out Bosnia's Muslims. France and Britain, nervous over their own large Muslim minorities and traditionally anti-Muslim because of their colonial past, thwarted US efforts to halt ethnic warfare against Bosnia's Muslims. Greece, Bulgaria, and Macedonia gave the Serbs economic and diplomatic support.

The west's tacit approval, or ineffectual opposition, to this ethnic-religious warfare opened the way for Serbia's 'final solution' in Kosovo.

And I think we should learn from these very sad stories, because we are all human beings and after that we may by chance be Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Muslim, Orthodox, or Atheist.

Long live diversity.

The Connaught Telegraph 7 September 2005

Death is the same everywhere but customs are different

8th September 2005

Talking to a friend of mine about Hurricane Katrina in the US, he said that he was surprised about the National Day of Mourning in the US and other countries for the thousands who died in the tragedy. After that we had a discussion about Irish customs in relation to death and funerals. He said that here in Ireland death is still the final barrier and the way we treat our dead reflects on our society and its values. Wakes have long been a traditional way of sending the dead on their last journey and even today this custom is still held in rural areas of Ireland. There death is supposed to be heralded by the wailing of a banshee, a fairy woman. On the lonely Aran Islands each family has its own knitting patterns so that if disaster struck one of the fishing vessels the bodies could be recognised by the pattern of the jumper a drowned fisherman wears.

In my country Albania if you didn't wear black to the funeral you would embarrass your family and if the women didn't weep and wail for their departed loved one it just wouldn't be an Albanian funeral. Some people may think: *'Why would people do this to themselves?*' But

for us, it is the way we mourn for our departed relatives. Even now, many people still weep for their loved ones years after they have died. Their weeping is not just weeping but wailing and senseless crying. It is crying with words and yes, to some ears it does involve screaming. Women often cry so much that they faint or are too weak to walk. To some it is even considered an art form. Some rhyme the words so beautifully together while the feelings and emotions surge from the deepest part of the soul. There are actually women famous for their grieving cries in Albania, it's like they were born to mourn. It is possible for the women to have heart attacks and seizures, brought on by the ritual.

To mourn for a loved one in Albania is to give your whole heart and soul and tears and even your life in remembrance. Albanians also have some other grieving customs that may also appear strange to the Irish. We cannot serve sweets in our house or listen to music for one year after the person dies. No one can even think of listening to music! Everyone there thinks music is a sign of happiness and when a person passes away, we are not happy.

Of course, living for three years in Ireland with my family, my children think, '*What kind of customs are*

these?' Even so, we can't forget our heritage and who we are, just because we are living in another country.

As I look at the differences between Albania and Ireland I began to notice that other cultures have their own customs and rituals concerning death. In China people wear white at a funeral. In Mexico they celebrate a whole day of the dead. Egyptians mummified their bodies to preserve their spirits for an eternal afterlife. But sometimes, in places, only a little time is devoted for grieving the dead.

However, both the Irish and the Albanians show respect for important deceased citizens by flying the flag at half-mast. They also both observe the tradition of lighting candles or placing flowers on the grave in remembrance of their loved ones. These tokens are beautiful but do not last long, yet they remind mourners that all life has to end. These customs give a sense of identity, a boundary for ourselves. However, during natural disasters such as the recent Tsunami, or Hurricane Katrina, customs are forgotten, boundaries are crossed and identities are lost.

Life is swallowed up in death.

But even though I am living in Ireland I love the Albanian customs and I can't forget my roots and

heritage. So, I hope that when I die, no matter how old I am or where I live that my family will weep and wail for me and give me a real Albanian send-off.

The Connaught Telegraph 14 September 2005

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ndrek Gjini was born in Albania. After his graduation from the *University of Shkoder in Albania,* with a BA (Honours) in Language and Literature, he worked first as a teacher and then as a journalist. During these years he published four books in the Albanian language, and many poems, reviews, essays, and articles in Albanian newspapers and magazines.

In 2002, he moved to the West of Ireland. In 2004, he undertook a course at Castlebar College of Further Education that led to a National Certificate in Print Journalism. At *Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology* he earned a BA (Honours) in Heritage Studies, (2010).

In 2011 he received an MA in Writing at *National University of Ireland, Galway*. His research and teaching interests are in digital humanities, book history, textual studies and bibliography, scholarly editing, and 20th-century literature.

Since 2014 he guest lectures regularly at the *(Writers' Seminar)* in the MA in Writing course at the National University of Ireland, Galway. His poems, short stories, and reviews have been published in Journals and Magazines in many countries.

Ndrek's first collection of poems in the English language, *The Death of Night*, was published in 2011 by *EMAL,* and his second book *The Invention of Shoes* was published in 2019 by Galway Academic Press. He was selected to read at the *Curit International Festival of Literature in 2019*, the *Strokestown International Poetry Festival in 2011*, and was a featured poet in the *'Cyphers' Magazine, Issue 71. and 85* . His work has also been published in The Mayo Anthology (Present Tense), in 2006, and in the *Writing4all Anthology, "The best of 2011",* MUSE INDIA, Issue 76, 2017, *'The Connaught Telegraph', 'Galway Advertiser', 'Galway City Tribune',* and '*Sin'* are among other newspapers and magazines where his work has been featured. He has been invited to read at the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology on both Galway and Castlebar campuses and at the Culture Night events.

He was selected among the 50 personalities included in the book published by Albanian Excellence 50×50 Symbol of a Generation.

During 2012-2013, he worked, as the Arts Office Assistant, in the Community and Culture Department of the Galway City Council. From 2013 until July 2015, he worked for the Galway Education Centre. From 2015 to June 2020 he worked as Admin and IT Support for Footfall. Currently, he works as Managing Editor of The Galway Review.

On April 12th, 2022, President Higgins received Mr. Ndrek Gjini, who presented a copy of the President's poetry collection "An Arid Season" which he translated into Albanian.